UNTAMED - EXCERPT

The caw! caw! cawing! of one stupid crow kept me up all night. (Well, more accurately, all day—'cause, you know, I'm a vampyre fledgling and we have that whole issue of day and night being turned around.) Anyway, I got zero sleep last night/day. But my crappy nonsleep is currently the easiest thing to deal with since life really sucks when your friends are pissed at you. I should know. I'm Zoey Redbird, currently the undisputed Queen of Making My Friends Pissed Land.

Persephone, the big sorrel mare who I could consider mine for as long as I lived at the House of Night, craned her head around and nuzzled my cheek. I kissed her soft muzzle and went back to brushing her sleek neck. Grooming Persephone always helped me think and made me feel better. And I definitely needed help with both of those things.

"Okay, so, I've managed to avoid the Big Confrontation for two days, but that can't continue," I told the mare. "Yes, I know they're in the cafeteria right now, eating dinner while they hang out together being all buddy-buddy and totally leaving me out."

Persephone snorted and went back to munching hay.

"Yeah, I think they're being jerks, too. Sure, I did lie to them, but it was mostly by omission. And, yeah, I kept some stuff from them. Mostly for their own good." I sighed. Well, the stuff about Stevie Rae being undead was for their own good. The stuff about me having a thing with Loren Blake—Vampyre Poet Laureate and professor at the House of Night—well, that was more for my own good. "But still." Persephone flicked an ear back to listen to me. "They're being really judgmental."

Persephone snorted again. I sighed again. Crap. I couldn't avoid them any longer.

After giving the sweet mare one last pat, I walked slowly out of her stall to the tack room and put up the array of currycombs and mane/tail brushes I'd been using on her for the past hour. I breathed deeply of the leather and horse smell, letting the soothing mixture ease my nerves. Catching my reflection in the smooth glass window of the tack room, I automatically ran my fingers through my dark hair, trying to make it look not so bedheady. I'd been Marked as a fledgling vampyre and moved to the House of Night for just over two months, but already my hair was noticeably thicker and longer. And supergood hair was only one of the many changes taking place with me. Some of them were invisible—like the fact that I had an affinity for all five of the elements. Some of them were very much visible—like the unique tattoos that framed my face in intricate, exotic swirls and then, unlike any other fledgling or adult vampyre, the sapphire design spread down my neck and shoulders, along my spine, and most recently, had moved around my waist, a little fact no one but my cat, Nala, our goddess Nyx, and I knew.

Like who could I show?

"Well, yesterday you had not one, but three boyfriends," I told the me with the dark eyes and cynical half smile that was reflected in the glass. "But you fixed that, didn't you? Today not only do you have zero boyfriends, but no one will ever trust you again for at least, I dunno, a gazillion years or so." Well, except Aphrodite, who totally freaked and took off two days ago because she might have suddenly been turned back into a human, and Stevie Rae, who was chasing said freaked re-humaned Aphrodite because she might have caused the fledgling-to-human issue when I cast a circle and turned her from creepy undead dead kid to odd-red-tattooed-vampyre-but-herself-again kid. "Either way," I told myself aloud, "you have managed to mess up just about everyone who has touched your life. Well done, you!"

My lip had actually started to quiver and I felt the sting of tears in my eyes. No. Bawling my eyes red wouldn't do any good. I mean, seriously, if it did, then my friends and I would have kissed (well, not literally) and made up days ago. I was just going to have to face them and start trying to make things right.

The late December night was cool and a little misty. The gaslights lining the sidewalk that stretched from the stable and field house area of the school to the main building flickered with little haloes of

yellow light, looking beautiful and old-worldly. Actually, the whole campus of the House of Night was gorgeous, and always made me think of something that belonged in an Arthurian legend more than in the twenty-first century. I love it here, I reminded myself. It's home. It's where I belong. I'll make it right with my friends, and everything will be okay then.

I was chewing my lip and worrying about just exactly how I was going to make it right with my friends when my mental stressing was interrupted by a weird flapping noise that filled the air around me. Something about the sound sent a chill down my spine. I looked up. There was nothing above me but darkness and sky and the winter-bare limbs of the huge oaks that lined the sidewalk. I shivered, having a walking-over-my-grave moment as the night went from soft and misty to dark and malevolent.

Hang on—dark and malevolent? Well, that's just silly! What I had heard was probably nothing more sinister than the wind rustling through the trees. Jeesh, I was losing it.

Shaking my head at myself, I kept walking but had taken only a couple of steps when it happened again. The weird flapping above me actually caused the air, which seemed ten degrees colder, to flutter wildly against my skin. I automatically flailed a hand up, imagining bats and spiders and all sorts of creepy things.

My fingers passed through nothingness, but it was frigid nothingness, and an icy pain sliced through my hand. Completely freaked out, I yelped and hugged my hand to my chest. For a moment I didn't know what to do, and my body was numb with fear. The flapping was getting louder and the cold more intense when I finally managed to move. Ducking my head, I did the only thing I could think to do. I ran for the nearest door to the school.

After slipping inside, I slammed the thick wooden door behind me and, panting for breath, turned to peer through the little arched window in the center of it. The night shifted and swam before my eyes, like black paint poured down a dark page. Still,
the terrible feeling of icy fear lingered within me. What was going on? Almost without realizing what I was doing, I whispered, "Fire, come to me. I need your warmth."

Instantly the element responded, filling the air around me with the soothing heat of a hearth fire. Still staring out the little window, I pressed my palms against the rough wood of the door. "Out there," I murmured. "Send your heat out there, too." With a whoosh of warmth, the element moved from me, through the door, and poured into the night. There was a hissing sound, like steam rising from dry ice. The mist roiled, thick and soupy, giving me a sense of dizzy vertigo that made me a little nauseated, and the strange darkness began to evaporate. Then the heat completely beat away the chill, and as suddenly as it had begun, the night was once again quiet and familiar.

What had just happened?

My stinging hand drew my attention from the window. I looked down. Across the back of my hand there were red welts, as though something with claws, or talons, had scraped across my flesh. I rubbed at the angry-looking marks, which stung like a curling iron burn.

Then the feeling hit me strong, hard, overwhelming—and I knew with my Goddess-given sixth sense that I shouldn't be here by myself. The coldness that had tainted the night—the ghostly something that had chased me inside and welted my hand—filled me with a terrible foreboding and for the first time in a long time, I was truly and utterly afraid. Not for my friends. Not for my grandma or my human ex-boyfriend, or even for my estranged
mom. I was afraid for myself. I didn't just want the company of my friends; I needed them.

Still rubbing my hand, I made my legs move and knew beyond any doubt that I would rather face the hurt and disappointment of my friends than whatever dark thing might be waiting for me in the concealing night.

I hovered for a second just outside the open doors to the busy "dining hall" (a.k.a. school cafeteria) watching the other kids talk easily and happily together, and I was almost overwhelmed with the sudden wish that I could be just another fledging—that I didn't have any extraordinary abilities or

the responsibilities that went along with those abilities. For a second I wanted to be normal so bad that it was hard for me to breathe.

Then I felt the soft brush of wind against my skin that seemed warmed by the heat of an invisible flame. I caught a whiff of the ocean, even though there is definitely no ocean near Tulsa, Oklahoma. I heard birdsong and smelled new-cut grass. And my spirit
quivered with silent joy within me as it acknowledged my powerful Goddess-given gifts of an affinity for each of the five elements: air, fire, water, earth, and spirit.

I wasn't normal. I wasn't like anyone else, fledgling or vampyre, and it was wrong of me to wish otherwise. And part of my not-normal-ness was telling me that I had to go in there and try to make peace with my friends. I straightened my spine and looked around the room with eyes that were clear of self-pity, and easily found my special group sitting at our booth.

I drew a deep breath and then made my way quickly across the cafeteria, giving a little nod or small smile to the kids who said hi to me. I noticed that everyone seemed to be reacting to me with their usual mix of respect and awe, which meant that my friends hadn't been talking crap about me to the masses. It also meant that Neferet hadn't launched an all-out, open attack against me. Yet.

I grabbed a quick salad and a brown pop. Then, holding on to my tray with such abnormal tightness that it was turning my fingers white, I marched straight to our booth and took my usual seat beside Damien.

When I sat down, no one looked at me, but their easy chatter instantly died, which is something I totally hate. I mean, what's more awful than walking up to a group of your supposed-to-be friends and having them all shut up so that you knew for sure they were all talking about you? Ugh.

"Hi," I said instead of running away or bursting into tears like I wanted to.

No one said anything.

"So, what's up?" I directed the question at Damien, knowing that my gay friend was naturally the weakest link in the don't-talk-to-Zoey chain.

Sadly, it was the Twins who answered me and not gay, and therefore more sensitive and polite, Damien.

"Not shit, right, Twin?" said Shaunee.

"That's right, Twin, not shit. 'Cause we can't be trusted to know shit," Erin said. "Twin, did you know we're totally untrustworthy?"

"Not until recently I didn't, Twin. You?" Shaunee said.

"Didn't know till recently either," Erin finished.

Okay, the Twins aren't really twins. Shaunee Cole is a caramel-colored Jamaican-American who grew up on the East Coast. Erin Bates is a gorgeous blonde who was born in Tulsa. The two met after being Marked and moving to the House of Night on the
same day. They clicked instantly—it's like genetics and geography never existed. They literally finish each other's sentences. And at that moment they were glaring at me with twin looks of angry suspicion.

God, they made me tired.

They also made me mad. Yes, I'd kept secrets from them. Yes, I'd lied to them. But I'd had to. Well, mostly I'd had to. And their twin holier-than-thou crap was getting on my last nerve.

"Thank you for that lovely commentary. And now I'll try asking someone who doesn't have to answer in a stereo version of hateful Gossip Girl Blair." I turned my attention away from them and looked directly at Damien, even though I could hear the Twins sucking air and getting ready to say something I was hoping they would one day regret. "So, I guess what I really wanted to ask when I

said ‘what’s up’ is if you’ve noticed any scary, ghostlike, flappy weirdness outside lately. Have you?”

Damien’s a tall, really cute guy with excellent bone structure whose brown eyes were usually warm and expressive but were, at this moment, wary and more than a little cold. “A flappy ghost thing?” he said. “Sorry, I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

My heart squeezed at the strangerlike tone of his voice, but I told myself that at least he’d answered my question. “On the way here from the stables, something kinda attacked me. I couldn’t really see anything, but it was cold and it put a big welt on my hand.” I lifted my hand to show him—and there was no welt there anymore.

Great.

Shaunee and Erin snorted together. Damien just looked really, really sad. I was opening my mouth to explain that there had been a welt there just a few minutes ago, when Jack rushed up.

“Oh, hi! I’m so sorry I’m late but when I put on my shirt I found a ginormic stain right on the front of it. Can you believe that?” Jack said as he hurried up with his tray of food and sat at his place beside Damien.

“A stain? It’s not on that lovely blue long-sleeved Armani I got you for Christmas, is it?” Damien said, scooting over to make room for his boyfriend.

“Ohmigod, no! I’d never spill anything on that one. I just love it and—” His words came to a staggering halt when his eyes flitted from Damien to me. He gulped. “Oh, uh. Hi, Zoey.”

“Hi, Jack,” I said, smiling at him. Jack and Damien are together. Hello. They’re gay. My friends and I, along with anyone who’s not narrow-minded and utterly judgmental, are cool with that.

“I didn’t expect to see you,” Jack babbled. “I thought you were still . . . uh . . . well . . .” He trailed off, looking uncomfortable and blushing a pretty pink.

“You thought I was still hiding in my room?” I supplied for him.

He nodded.

“No.” I said firmly, “I’m done doing that.”

“Well, la-te-da,” Erin began, but before Shaunee could do her usual chime-in act, a blatantly sexy laugh coming from the door behind us made everyone turn and gawk.

Aphrodite twitched into the room, laughing while she batted her eyes at Darius, one of the youngest and hottest of the Sons of Erebus Warriors who protected the House of Night, and did an excellent hair flip. The girl always had been good at multitasking,
but I was totally shocked at how nonchalant and utterly cool and collected she looked. Only two days ago she’d been almost dead and then utterly freaked because the sapphire-colored outline of a crescent moon—which appeared on all fledglings’ foreheads,
Marking them as having begun the Change that would either end in becoming a vampyre or in becoming dead—had disappeared from her face.

Which meant she had somehow turned back into a human.